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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 003240

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/27/2026
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: STAFFDEL MEACHAM MEETS SUMATE LEADERS

REF: A. CARACAS 3171

[1](#)B. CARACAS 2845

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT R. DOWNES,
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) Visiting Senate Foreign Relations Committee Staff Member Carl Meacham, accompanied by USAID officer and poloff, met October 23 with the leadership of the electoral NGO Sumate. Sumate leaders predicted Chavez would likely win the December 3 presidential election through a combination of fear and electoral tricks, such as tracking voting patterns using fingerprint (digital scanning) machines. Sumate Vice President Maria Corina Machado presented Sumate's plans for countering some BRV machinations and monitoring campaign excesses. They expressed little confidence in EU and OAS observers' ability to improve electoral transparency, but thought they could probably reduce the potential for electoral violence and boost voter turnout. Machado, citing the Spanish parliamentary delegation that observed the 2005 legislative elections, thought similar European delegations might have greater impact. Meacham has cleared this cable. End Summary.

Polls

[1](#)2. (C) Sumate electoral NGO President Alejandro Plaz, Vice President Maria Corina Machado, and member Roberto Abdul met October 23 with visiting Senate Staff Member Carl Meacham, USAID officer, and poloff and painted a grim view of the opposition's prospects in the December 3 presidential election. Abdul said private polling results they had seen indicate President Chavez and leading opposition candidate Manuel Rosales are within five points of each other. (Note: Post has not had an opportunity to review those results, but finds them optimistic.) The group reiterated their long-standing belief that most polls fail to capture the fear of government retaliation that prevents opposition supporters from stating their true voting intentions, but claimed this particular poll (NFI) incorporated methods to control for voters' concerns.

The Salami Approach to Victory

¶3. (C) Nevertheless, the Sumate leaders said Chavez will use fear and manipulate electoral conditions to steal votes from Rosales. Abdul likened the currently high levels of political fear to that experienced during the 1979 Iranian referendum on becoming an Islamic Republic and the 1990 Nicaraguan presidential election when voters were constantly under threat of government retribution if they voted against the government. Abdul explained that published polling results and the government's publicity campaign reinforce the perception that Chavez has a commanding lead over Rosales. This further discourages voters sympathetic to the opposition--but dependent on government benefits--from taking a chance on Rosales. Whereas in Nicaragua fair electoral conditions allowed the opposition to win, Abdul said that Venezuela's skewed electoral system is heavily stacked against the opposition.

¶4. (C) Sumate leaders said Rosales' greatest electoral hurdle was the fingerprint (digital scanning) machines. The National Electoral Council (CNE) has admitted that the machines can allow them to track who votes in real time. Machado said that during the voter registration drive the CNE had requested cell phone records to text message advertisements to unregistered voters. Using this information and data from the fingerprint machines on election day the BRV could text message those who have not voted, scaring people into either voting for Chavez or abstaining.

¶5. (C) Machado also listed other potential BRV machinations that would likely be used, such as last minute migrations of opposition voters from their traditional voting centers, potential electronic vote padding, and an intentional failure to record all voting tally sheets (actas). (Note: Since the

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2004 referendum, the opposition has accused the CNE of arbitrarily moving an unusually high number of voters from their traditional voting centers to dilute the opposition vote. Plaz and Machado said a small percentage of actas from the 2005 legislative election were never counted.)

Plans

¶5. (C) Machado outlined several plans that Sumate has developed to counter some potential BRV moves. Sumate will soon begin a program whereby people can register to receive verification of their voting centers via text message. The NGO is also organizing a campaign to alert and train those selected as poll workers. In addition, Sumate plans to place volunteers outside each of the 33,000 voting centers on election day to monitor the number of voters entering voting centers, conduct exit polls, and observe whether proper procedures are followed during the audit of voting receipts after the vote. These volunteers will call in regularly, allowing Sumate to track results and irregularities in real time. Sumate leaders showed Meacham the center where their volunteers are tracking campaign propaganda on 5 television channels and in 70 newspapers and compiling violations of CNE campaign norms. The NGO's most recent statistics recorded Chavez' campaign air time near 365,000 minutes--most of which were ads sponsored (illegally) by local governors and mayors--compared to about 36,000 minutes for the Rosales campaign.

Little Faith in Observers

¶16. (C) Sumate said that international observers could reduce the potential for electoral violence and boost voter turnout, but otherwise would do little more than validate a flawed electoral process. Machado questioned EU or OAS reasons for observing, since not one of their missions' 2005 recommendations were taken. It stands to reason in her view that no further observation should be undertaken until previous recommendations have been cleared out. She said observers tend to base their judgments on how close election results match polling figures in the final weeks before the election. Since poll results are colored by political fear thus underestimating opposition support, observers will be less inclined to believe fraud claims if Chavez wins. Sumate leaders were particularly pessimistic about prospects for an effective OAS mission because of OAS Secretary General Insulza's seeming unwillingness to stand up to Chavez. Plaz noted, for example, that the preliminary OAS observer report on the 2005 legislative election had been fairly critical of the voting process, but the final version was watered down, he alleged, with Insulza's blessing.

¶17. (C) The group expressed a little more confidence in the EU's ability to be critical, but Machado told Meacham that the EU exploratory observer team privately admitted they would probably not be able to detect electronic fraud if it were to occur. Sumate leaders thought observers from Latin American NGOs could at least provide the region with greater insight into the problems of the Venezuelan electoral system. Sumate flatly rejected the notion of the Carter Center (CC) as an objective observer and said their understanding of CC's proposal suggested the mission would be inadequate. Machado thought that, if anything, delegations of accredited European parliamentarians similar to the Spanish parliamentary delegation that observed the 2005 legislative elections might have greater impact. (Note: In 2005 an accredited Spanish parliamentary delegation produced a rather critical observation report that sparked GOS concern about Venezuela's electoral system.)

¶18. (C) Plaz and Machado said their trial remained stalled, but they expected it to resume next year. Nevertheless, they continue to receive constant inquiries from the tax authority (Seniat) about their personal finances and Sumate operations. They also told Meacham that a recent press expose had uncovered a series of affidavits with the same date from Giovanni de Vasquez, the prosecution's discredited star witness in the Danilo Anderson murder case, naming intellectual authors of the crime. Plaz and Machado were named in two of them.

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